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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000869

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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (HARRIS)
STATE PASS USTR (BELL), USPTO (ADLIN AND ADAMS), USAID
(MCCLOUD)
USDOC FOR ITA/MAC/ONE (NATHAN MASON), ADVOCACY CTR (JAMES),
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CASABLANCA FOR FCS (ORTIZ)
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

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SUBJECT: REGIME INSIDER OUTLINES TUNISIA'S CHALLENGES

REF: TUNIS 841

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: During the Ambassador's June 29 courtesy call, President of the Economic and Social Council and Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party stalwart, Sadok Chaabane presented his views on trade, extremism, and democracy. Chabaane stressed the importance of reducing economic dependence on Europe and expressed a desire for a Free Trade Agreement with the United States. After raising the specter of Islamic extremism, Chabaane echoed RCD Vice President Hamed Karoui's (Reftel) critique of the opposition, blaming their weakness for slow political reform. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) During the Ambassador's June 29 courtesy call, President of the Economic and Social Council Sadok Chaabane highlighted the importance of the institution in advising top GOT leadership and as a space for debate. The Economic and Social Council has 120 members who advise the President, Prime Minister, and the Chambers of Deputies and of Advisors. The Council has five permanent commissions: Education, Youth, and Culture; Economics and Finance; Health, Labor, and Social Issues; International Cooperation; and Agriculture and Regional Development. The Council includes approximately 30 subject matter experts, but the rest of the membership is comprised of representatives from the Tunisian General Workers' Union (UGTT), all (authorized) political parties, employers, farmers, civil society groups, and representatives from the governorates. Chabaane boasted that the Council is "practically the voice of civil society."

Toward an FTA

13. (SBU) In discussing the economy, Chabaane stated that the GOT wants to diversify and reduce its dependence on Europe, with whom Tunisia conducts 80 percent of its trade. He cited the GOT goal to reduce this percentage to 60 percent by 2030. He expressed Tunisia's desire for an eventual Free Trade Agreement with the United States, but also stressed the importance of Maghreb economic integration in helping to attract large US firms to trade and invest in the region. The Ambassador emphasized his own desire to strengthen US-Tunisian economic relations and noted the potential visit

of a US business delegation in November.

Specter of Extremism

14. (C) Chabaane spoke strongly about the role of Arab media and the influence of Saudi Arabia in encouraging extremism. Chabaane stated that "we must control the media" and argued that hate speech cannot be allowed in the name of free speech. He argued that those who perpetuate extremism and "hate speech" via the media should be prosecuted from abroad and then arrested when they leave their countries. Chabaane complained that all the "good" stations are encrypted and mused that allowing free access to these "good" stations would help fight extremism. Chabaane emphasized the importance of remembering Tunisian history. Tunisians had spoken Latin, had been Christian, and part of the Roman empire -- this history should not be forgotten. Tunisians should be proud of their own history, he stated, and should not look to Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia.

Slow Steps Toward Democracy

15. (C) Using familiar GOT talking points Chabaane noted that democracy required many conditions and that these conditions must be fulfilled slowly. While Chabaane acknowledged that Tunisians are educated, comfortable economically, and open to the world, he blamed the weakness of the opposition for the current political situation, echoing the argument given by RCD Vice President Hamed Karoui in a recent meeting with the Ambassador (Reftel). He asked rhetorically, "How do you create opposition?" Chabaane stressed that it is not easy and requires time. He stated that the GOT would like the opposition to regroup, but they are divided and no leaders have emerged. Referencing the Iranian revolution, he sighed that currently the more extreme the opposition, the more popular they are. Chabaane told the Ambassador that the day Tunisia has a strong opposition, then religious extremists will be a minority. Democracy needs to be based on programs and ideas rather than based on faith, he stated, gifting the Ambassador a copy of his book "Program Democracy Versus Faith Democracy." Chabaane alluded to a debate inside the government about reform and asserted that President Ben Ali will announce changes on the twentieth anniversary of his regime this November. Ambassador stressed the importance of further progress by the GOT towards democracy, freedom of expression and freedom of association. Tunisia, he noted, is ready.

Comment and Bio Note

16. (C/NF) Sadok Chabaane's influence within the GOT extends far beyond his position as President of the Economic and Social Council. He previously served as Director of the Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies and was named to the Council following the death of the incumbent. Chabaane's business cards notably list only his name, with no title or contact information, perhaps reflecting his opinion that he needs no introduction. During the meeting, he spoke with an ease and frankness uncommon to GOT officials who are careful to stick closely to their talking points. An RCD stalwart and Ben Ali confidant, Chabaane has served as Ben Ali's Advisor, Chairman of Ben Ali's 1999 re-election campaign, and has written several books on Ben Ali. Widely considered to be one of the RCD's top intellectuals, Chabaane may in fact have written many of the GOT talking points on democracy. However, many of his ideas about media and combating extremism appeared to reflect his personal views rather than an official line. Chabaane's expression of desire for an FTA is particularly notable, marking yet another GOT meeting where the FTA has been raised and indicating that a consensus may have developed in the GOT at the highest levels. END COMMENT.

